NCA

VOC FOR PGM/FN

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ERITREA: THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE

ANNCR:

A GOVERNMENT OFFENSIVE AGAINST SECESSIONIST GUERRILLAS IS UNDERWAY IN THE ETHIOPIAN PROVINCE OF ERITREA. VOA'S DAVID HYATT HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT ON THE FIGHTING.

VOICE:

THE SECESSIONIST WAR IN ERITREA HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR SOME SIXTEEN YEARS. AND GUERRILLAS FIGHTING FOR THE INDEPENDENCE OF ERITREA NOW ARE SAID TO CONTROL ABOUT NINETY PER CENT OF THE PROVINCE, WHICH IS STRATEGICALLY LOCATED ON THE RED SEA.

ETHIOPIA'S ONLY SEAPORTS -- MASSAWA AND ASSAB -- ARE LOCATED IN ERITREA.

SINCE THE EARLY YEARS OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA, ERITREA HAS FLUCTUATED BETWEEN INDEPENDENCE AND SOME KIND OF AFFILIATION WITH ETHIOPIA. THE AREA WAS ONCE PART OF THE KINGDOM OF AXUM, FLOURISHING FROM THE FOURTH TO THE SIXTH CENTURY AND STRETCHING ACROSS THE RED SEA INTO THE ARABIAN PENINSULA. ERITREA BECAME LINKED WITH ETHIOPIA IN THE TENTH CENTURY, BUT RETAINED MUCH OF ITS INDEPENDENCE. THE RISE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE CREATED A DISPUTE OVER CONTROL OF ERITREA THAT LASTED FOR MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED YEARS.

IN EIGHTEEN NINETY, ERITREA BECAME A COLONY OF ITALY. THE ITALIANS TWICE LAUNCHED ATTACKS AGAINST ETHIOPIA FROM ERITREA. LATER, BRITAIN GAINED CONTROL OF THE AREA, ADMINISTERING IT UNTIL NINETEEN FIFTY-TWO, WHEN ERITREA WAS FEDERATED WITH ETHIOPIA. TEN YEARS LATER EMPEROR HAILE SELASSIE FULLY INTEGRATED IT INTO THE ETHIOPIAN EMPIRE.

THE CURRENT ERITREAN SECESSIONIST STRUGGLE HAS BEEN HAMPERED BY RIVALRY AMONG NATIONALIST GROUPS. THE LARGEST AND OLDEST FACTION -- THE ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT -- REPORTEDLY IS SUPPORTED BY THE ARABS. IT HAS FREQUENTLY BEEN AT ODDS WITH THE ERITREAN PEOPLE'S LIBERATION FRONT -- WHICH IS SAID TO BE MORE RADICAL WITH MARXIST BACKING. A THIRD FACTION -- HEADED BY OSMAN SALEH SABEH -- APPARENTLY HAS THE SMALLEST FOLLOWING AND REPORTEDLY IS BACKED BY IRAQ.

WESTERN OBSERVERS BELIEVE THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT WILL HAVE A HARD TIME BEATING THE BATTLE-HARDENED, HIGHLY MOTIVATED AND WELL-ENTRENCHED ERITREAN GUERRILLAS -- WHO NUMBER ABOUT THIRTY THOUSAND.
JS/RCS